

Preparing for the Geriatric Certified Specialist Exam

The Geriatric Certified Specialist (GCS) Exam is a highly respected certification process for physical therapists that are committed to providing the best evidenced-based care to elders. Preparation for taking the Geriatric Certified Specialist Exam requires a commitment of time, energy and focus to the entire process. This is a difficult exam and should be taken seriously. This outline is designed to help you in your preparation process. Reviewing and using the resources on this list does not guarantee passing the exam, however a thorough understanding of physical therapy practices for geriatric clients will improve critical thinking and patient care for those who embrace this knowledge.

Specialist Exams reflect the ability to critically think while applying evidenced-based care to elderly persons. Thus, the questions are not rote memory. Rather, one must understand the principles of care and apply those principles to the case studies presented. The case studies represent complex cases that may be seen in treatment settings. Remember, Geriatric Certified Specialists treat in a wide variety of settings including acute hospital, rehabilitation units, home care, private practice, skilled nursing facilities, assisted living units, etc. The clients treated may be age 65 to 105+. Clients may be healthy with an acute incident or may be chronically ill with multiple comorbidities that affect function, treatment, and outcome. One must understand these large variables when preparing for the exam.

To begin your application process:

1. Request all application materials from American Board of Physical Therapy Specialties (ABPTS) by visiting the APTA web site at www.apta.org. Review requirements thoroughly.
2. Review the practice questions provided and consider how best to study for questions that are worded in multiple choice style where many of the choices will be true and you must determine the truest or the most correct response.
3. Ensure that you do have enough clinical hours in the specialty to sit for the Exam or that you have satisfied the requirements to sit based on completion of a credentialed residency program in geriatrics.

Suggestions for Preparing for the GCS Exam

1. Consider enrolling in an APTA approved Geriatric Clinical Residency Program. This is especially a good option for new(er) graduates. Residency programs are designed specifically to train graduates to become GCS's. These programs typically take about one year to complete. Residency programs offer 1:1 mentoring throughout the year with experts, including GCS's. For a list of APTA credentialed residency programs in geriatric PT, visit www.apta.org and click on Professional Development.

2. Become a member of the Section on Geriatrics to begin to receive the peer reviewed *Journal of Geriatric Physical Therapy* and other resources that are produced by the Section.
3. Evaluate the time you will need to prepare for the certification exam. Six months is most likely the minimum one should consider though everyone learns at different paces; this is a recommendation only.
4. Schedule a set number of hours each day or week to specifically study evidenced-based literature and recommended texts.
5. Acquire and study as many *Home Study* courses produced by the Section on Geriatrics as you are able. These courses provide education covering the breadth and depth of a variety of settings and diagnoses in which GCS Physical Therapists currently work. In particular, the FOCUS issue has been particularly useful for many exam takers (per testimonials) The other courses are of excellent quality as well; the distinguishing feature of the FOCUS course is that it specifically addresses all of the physical therapist practice patterns. The Section updates all recurrent courses every 5 years, so information is always current and topical. Home Study courses can also count towards CEU requirements in most states.
6. Evaluate and treat as many geriatric patient/clients with varying diagnoses in your setting.
7. Visit and observe in as many treatment settings as possible to have first-hand knowledge of the types of patients/clients and diagnoses treated by physical therapists.
8. Find a mentor. Someone who is currently a GCS who is willing to share knowledge, materials, and time with you. The Directory of Certified Specialists can be found at www.apta.org by clicking on “Professional Resources,” and “Find a Clinical Specialist.” If you have trouble finding a mentor, the Section on Geriatrics also keeps a list of GCS Physical Therapists who have agreed to serve as mentors, which we provide to Section on Geriatrics members only. For the name of a mentor, contact geriatrics@apta.org.
9. Check on the website www.geriatricspt.org to review old issues of the *Journal* as well as be directed to the body of evidenced-based research currently available from APTA.
10. Investigate and enroll in the current offerings of online courses available at the Section’s web site www.geriatricspt.org.
11. Review the Clinical Resource Library available at the Section’s website that provides a vast set of links, current resources, and research specifically related to geriatric physical therapy.
12. Attend the APTA Combined Sections Meetings to become immersed in the field attending courses, studying posters, visiting the booth, talking to authors and authorities

in the field, and receive first-hand experience with the many therapists who have successfully attained certification.

13. Though the certification exam is heavily weighted in clinical practice, there may be questions related to health care policy, public health knowledge, management principles, etc. It is best to keep a broad perspective in these areas as this represents national viewpoints and not individual carrier or fiscal intermediary policies. Therefore, we suggest the best resource for policy learning and understanding Medicare implications is the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid (CMS). There are multiple self-paced, self-learning modules available at <http://www.cms.hhs.gov/medlearn/>. Since Medicaid is different state to state, questions will not be reflective of issues related to this type of public programming.

14. Carefully choose continuing education courses. Though many advertise as geriatric courses, one must make sure that the techniques and learning presented actually represent evidence-based care versus novel concepts and or unproven, complementary-type treatment approaches. Caveat emptor!

15. Enmesh yourself in the large body of peer-reviewed knowledge available. Included in this body of knowledge are excellent texts written by members of the Section on Geriatrics. The authors who have written many excellent works include Carole B. Lewis, Jennifer Bottomley, Tim Kauffman, Andrew A. Guccinone, & Luther Kloth. Seminal works include:

Aging: The Health Care Challenge by Carole B. Lewis

Geriatric Orthopaedics: Rehabilitative Management of Common Problems by Trudy S. Goldstein

Geriatric Physical Therapy: A Clinical Approach by Carole B. Lewis & Jennifer M. Bottomley

Geriatric Physical Therapy, Second Edition edited by A.A. Guccione

Geriatric Rehabilitation Manual by Tim Kauffman

Orthopedic assessment and Treatment of the Geriatric Patient by Carole B. Lewis and Karen A. Knortz

Pharmacology in Rehabilitation by Charles D. Ciccone

Wound Healing Alternatives in Management by J.M. McCulloch, L.C. Kloth, & J.A. Feedar

Improving Mobility in Older Persons: A Manual for Geriatric Specialists (An Aspen Series) by Carole B. Lewis

Health Promotion and Exercise for Older Adults: An Instructor's guide (An Aspen Series) by Carole B. Lewis

Self-Assessment Tools for Physical Therapists: Geriatric APTA Publication

Cardiovascular & Pulmonary Physical Therapy: An Evidence-based Approach by William E. DeTurk & Lawrence P. Cahalin